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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENTIANE 000509

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL, PRM

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SUBJECT: ROK EMBASSY ASKED TO APPROACH GOL ON 10 DPRK  
ASYLUM SEEKERS

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia M. Haslach, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: The ROK Foreign Ministry has asked its Embassy in Vientiane to approach the GoL to seek a "humanitarian" solution for 10 DPRK citizens currently imprisoned in Luang Prabang province. The ROK Embassy intends to raise the case of these 10 with the Deputy Foreign Minister, but -- like us -- worries that bringing the issue of the 10 to the government's attention may lead the Lao to deport the group to China. We share the ROK Embassy's view that the "underground railroad" for DPRK asylum seekers through northern Laos works best when it is out of sight and mind of the central government. The GoL does not want to be seen as facilitating North Korean refugee flight, concerned as it is about the impact on both the DPRK and the Thai bilateral relationships. End summary.

12. (C) The arrest of 10 DPRK asylum seekers by authorities in northern Laos last week has brought to international attention the flow of North Koreans through Laos to Thailand. When we first learned of the detention of this group last week, we spoke with the South Korean Embassy First Secretary, who told us that a South Korean broker had handled the group's travel through Laos, that the 10 North Koreans had been detained in Luang Namtha province, and that officials there were demanding hefty "fines" for their release. At the time the ROK Embassy was not inclined to get involved in the arrest, believing their intervention would wreck ongoing negotiations between the South Korean broker and the Luang Namtha authorities. In the end, the broker (with money paid by NGOs) paid "fines" of \$500 for each of the 10, and the Namtha authorities released them. The group's weekend release supported the ROK Embassy's view that non-involvement was the best policy, the First Secretary told us.

13. (C) The re-arrest of the group in Luang Prabang province over the weekend has, however, brought renewed calls for the South Koreans to intervene on a more official level. The First Secretary told us today the group was probably rearrested because, by the terms of their release, they were to return to China (this is at odds with an NGO report that the group was given a seven-day "pass" for travel in Laos.) She speculated that when the South Korean broker took the 10 south to Luang Prabang instead of north to China, the Luang Namtha authorities alerted the police in Luang Prabang to detain the group.

14. (C) The First Secretary said that the re-arrest of the

group had attracted a renewed call from the South Korean and U.S. NGOs involved for intervention from the ROK government. As a result, her ministry was under considerable pressure to "do something" to get the 10 released from jail in Luang Prabang. The Ministry had ordered the Embassy to approach the GoL to "negotiate" their release. The ROK Ambassador was seeking an appointment with Deputy FM Bounkeut (the same Deputy FM who was helpful to us with our DPRK asylum seeker in early 2005) to discuss the case. The First Secretary was also seeking a meeting with Director-General-level officials to propose in a low-key way the possibility of negotiating their release. The South Koreans assumed that any negotiation would involve more payments; the First Secretary said her ministry was "prepared to pay."

15. (C) We shared our view with the ROK Embassy that raising the arrest of the 10 with the Foreign Ministry could have negative ramifications for their security. The First Secretary agreed that the Lao would first and foremost not

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want to be seen facilitating the transit of DPRK asylum seekers through Laos. The Lao were very conscious of the impact of DPRK asylum seekers on bilateral relations with both the Thai and the North Koreans. The South Koreans pointed out that the Lao had agreed to inform the North Korean Embassy in Vientiane any time DPRK citizens were arrested in Laos, presumably to give the DPRK Embassy an opportunity to vet the asylum seekers and request the return of those of interest. For our part, we noted that last year the Thai pressed the Lao to crack down on the transit of North Korean through Laos.

16. (C) Comment: The use of Laos as a stop on the North Korean underground railroad works only as long as it stays informal

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and below the radar screen. The Lao government has a poor track record on protection of refugees, and in fact has refused UNHCR permission to reopen an office in Vientiane. The GoL is not in any way sympathetic to the North Koreans, who may remind them all too much of their own refugee exodus from the ethnic Hmong population. The DPRK asylum seekers currently passing through Laos depend on the greed, not the sympathy, of local officials to grease their passage on to Thailand. End comment.

HASLACH